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The Venerable Sport of Cockfighting

Richard E. Powell, Jr.

Whether antique or modern, American or European, the existing materials on cockfighting suffer from a general lack of authorial objectivity which detracts from their credibility. Cocking books have usually been produced by enthusiasts and apologists for the sport who have felt compelled to overtly defend the practice, rather than present a dispassionate review of its development. In recent years the apologetic tones have diminished, only to be replaced by contemporary normative thoughts regarding cruelty toward animals, under the influence of which actual historical attitudes about cockfighting are adulterated or neglected, and any possible justification for the practice is dismissed *a priori*. Both the apologist and antagonists of cockfighting have made impressive points in their course, but little effort has been made to judiciously evaluate their relevance to current public debates regarding the permissible bounds of animal use in our culture.

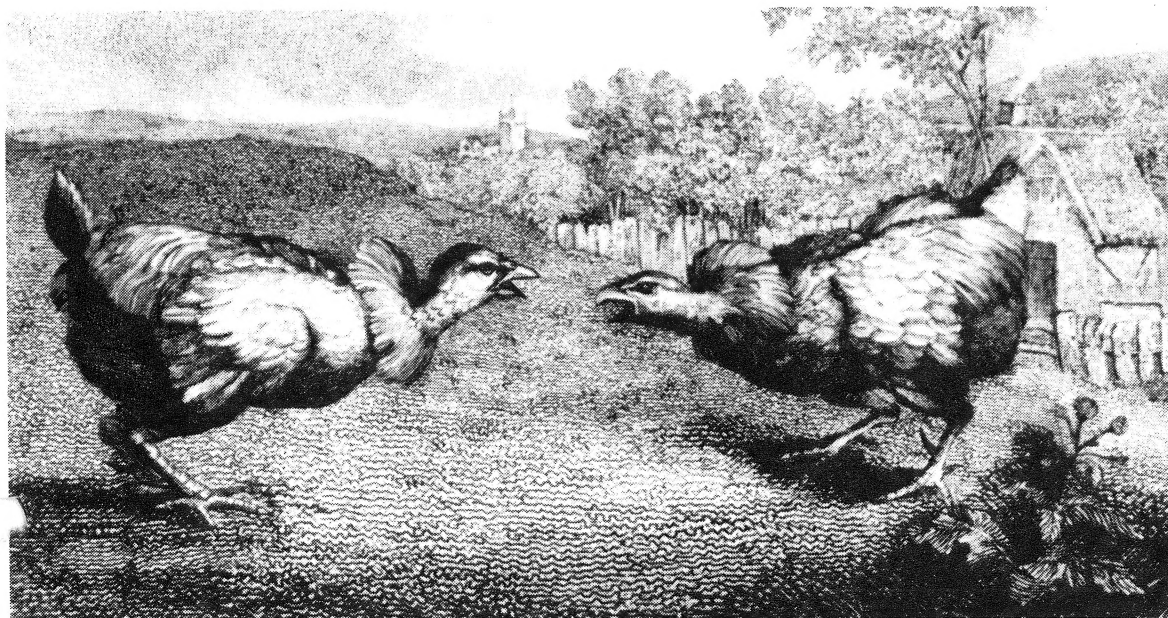
The National Sporting Library's collection focuses on the history and development of cockfighting during the most recent period of its prevalence in Western societies, from the seventeenth century to the present. Serious students of animal welfare and the cultural significance of specific aspects of husbandry will find very fertile insights through the materials available at the Library. Those whose interests focus on cockfighting in Virginia and colonial America will find that books on the subject are scarce, and that many examinations of cockfighting in America before 1800 rely heavily on English precedents and on traditional lore.

The discussion which follows is intended as a general introduction to cocking in Virginia through the eighteenth century, and, though limited in detail, may provide enough background information to assist readers of those nineteenth century and modern editions which dominate the available sources.

Cocks-of-the-Game are the product of careful selective breeding designed to intensify the natural aggressions which one rooster exhibits toward another. Just as modern Leghorns have been selected for egg production, Rock-Cornish for meat, and Sebright bantams for plumage, gamecocks were bred for the stamina and temperament conducive to sustained mortal combat. Consequently, eighteenth century cockers perceived the basic diversion among chickens as between cocks-of-the-game with a fighting heritage, and all non-game birds, collectively called "dunghill fowl." The breeding of pure, pedigreed gamecocks was well established before the seventeenth century, and by 1710 the game breed incorporated at least two conformation types, and numerous varieties distinguished by mannerisms or plumage patterns. Keepers of gamecocks attended closely to the choice of individual breeding birds, taking especial care to avoid bloodline

contamination by dunghill fowl.

This English tradition of gamecock husbandry was exported to America. Elizabeth Pryor asserts in the monograph *Colonial Poultry Husbandry* that gamecocks "were the earliest specimens of selective [poultry] breeding in the colonies of Virginia and Maryland," from which arose "the impetus to improvements in the poultry yard through the search for better housing, and improved methods of breeding." This claim is supported by eighteenth century references to recognized strains, such as Bacon's



Engraving of fighting cocks from *Cocking and Its Votaries*, the finely rebound volume from the Harry T. Peters, Jr. collection.

Thunderbolts (1746) and Goodriche's *Polecats* (1787) in Virginia, and Captain Jonathan Caldwell's *Blue Hens* (1775) in Delaware. Baron Von Cloisen wrote while in Williamsburg during the Revolution that remarkable fighting cocks "often win a reputation for fifty miles or more," and that "some breeds of cocks are very expensive." Attempts to import improved stock into the colonies were made by 1737 in North Carolina, where cockers sought gamecocks "from England and Ireland, and to that intent implored masters of ships, and other Trading persons to supply them."

Slaves also bred and supervised their own gamecocks, and were probably en-

practice. But the sport of cockfighting, contingent as it was upon the predictable ferocity and tenacity of the cocks, required the importation or domestic development of specialized fighting strains.

Once established, such strains were accorded a remarkable degree of attention, including special diets, drink, medication, and physical training. Regimens for the care of gamecocks were widely published in England in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. Private recipes for training diets were quietly circulated and at least one American example, the "Memorandum on How to Feed a Cock Before You Have Him Fight," (1779) has survived among

cock gaffs" in listings printed from 1766 through 1771. In practice, "exceedingly beautiful cocks were produced, armed with long, sharp, steel-pointed gaffs, which were firmly attached to their natural spurs."

The fight itself was a battle to the death which took place in a prepared arena or designated area known as the "pit," even when elevated above ground level. English cockpits were often very elaborate, as at the Cockpit Royal in Westminster, but colonial cockfights occurred wherever convenient. No clear record of a free-standing structure or permanent colonial facility exclusively for cockfighting has been uncovered, though there is some archaeological evidence of an outdoor pit (ca. 1720) at the Shield's Tavern in Williamsburg. Advertisements printed in the *Virginia Gazette* listed a number of matches at county courthouses and taverns, most of which were apparently held outside. One of Rochambeau's officers noted that a Virginia "battlefield" of 1782 was "a ring enclosed by a rope, around which a circle of spectators sits." Elkanah Watson's remark that "several houses formed a spacious square, in the center of which was a large cockpit," attests to the open-aired environment of the match he witnessed in Hampton, Virginia: that he "soon sickened at this barbarous sport, and retired under the shade of a wide-spread willow," emphasizes the point.

The popularity of cockfighting in Virginia and other regions of colonial America is supported by the many personal accounts, advertisements, and public papers which document its frequency. Modern apologists for the sport have often attempted to attach a certain credibility to cockfighting by alluding to its eighteenth century prominence, and by extending participation in the sport to numerous political luminaries of the Republic, in an effort to transfer their personal integrity to cockfighting. Not surprisingly, such apologists have neglected the undercurrent of opposition which emerged in that period to confront the practice itself, as well as the disruptive social behavior which was prevalent at cock matches.

Overt defenses of cockfighting were not common in the eighteenth century, presumably because the sport was so widely accepted, and persuasive opposition so limited, that no public debates arose to demand its justification. Robert Howlett's preface to *The Royal Pastime of Cockfighting* does imply, however, that cockfighting was perceived as the seed of certain vices early in the century. To counter this



'Tom, Jerry and Logic backing Tommy the Sweep at the Royal Cockpit'. Drawn and engraved by Cruickshank 1821.

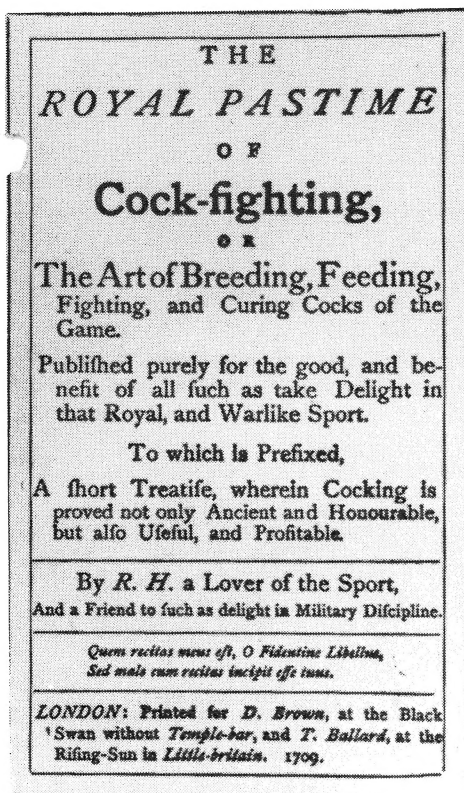
trusted with their owners' birds, but this responsibility did not fall exclusively upon them. In fact, young whites were so engaged by the sport that a man like Devereux Jarrat, who was to become an Episcopal clergyman in southern Virginia, listed the care of gamecocks as one of his principal occupations before 1750. John Hartwell Cocke kept a notebook which points to several strains developed by his peers in Surry County, Virginia, and shows that birds were placed under the supervision of local landholders over a ten year period ending in 1798. Gentry involvement extended to other colonies, for at least two Philadelphia physicians doubled as cockmasters during the 1730's, and occasionally exchanged breeding stock and advice.

Fighting common roosters may have begun at any time after the colonists brought chickens to America, and some cockfighting must have occurred prior to 1682, when Pennsylvania outlawed the

the correspondence of Andrew Jackson.

Cocks were individually trained to increase their strength, endurance and aggressiveness. Most cockerels had their combs and wattles surgically removed (dubbed), and the plumage of fighting birds was carefully trimmed in compliance with accepted pit rules before combat. Confirmation of these practices is found in the journal of Moreau de St. Mery, who remarked of gamecocks that the "combs are cut to offer less of a hold to the enemy," and by the Marquis de Chastellux's observation that the "neck feathers that might hinder [the cock] are plucked out."

In Virginia cocks were typically fitted with sharpened steel cockspurs designed to hasten the course of a match by allowing the bird to strike more mortal wounds upon his opponent. Spurs were advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* by the Williamsburg Merchant John Greenhow, who mentioned a stock of "large and small cock



Title page from *The Royal Pastime of Cock-fighting* 1709 by Robert Howlett (R.H.). The NSL copy is a facsimile edition of which only 100 copies were printed in 1899.

perception the author composed twenty-three pages of loose moral and historical arguments supporting the pastime.

Cockfighting, he argued, had been practiced by all great cultures, including the Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews. Under the influence of that selubrious diversion cockfighting flourished: "nor did the Roman Empire shrink so long as Cocking was esteemed in Rome." Moreover, the sport had universal human appeal, being cultivated not only in England, but throughout Europe and Asia. The author maintained that men were led to virgure by the martial courage which gamecocks exemplify, while true devotion to the pastime was a powerful deterrent to unmanly vices. "And really it were to be wished that our own nation were but as much inclined to countenance and encourage so innocent an Exercise as Cocking... the good effects of it would soon be se, that it would divert the English Gentry from effeminate Dancing, Whoring, and Drinking, which are three Evils grown now almost Epidemical." Finally, cockfighting was seen to be consistent with the laws of nature as manifested in the birds' instinct, for "if not for Combat, why was the Fighting-Cock created."

By mid-century, the vogue of cockfighting and its association with other prevailing diversions of the time, were still

paralleled by Anglican activities in England and New York, where members of the clergy were themselves found to frequent the cockpit.

During 1752, opponents of cockfighting found a brief period of ascendance in Williamsburg, Virginia. One indication of growing concern over the social implications of the sport came from the president and masters of the College of William and Mary who, on August 14, 1752, collectively ordered:

that no scholar belonging to the College of what Age, Rank, or Quality, soever... be any way concern'd in keeping or fighting cocks under Pain of the like [to be immediately dispatched and sent off, & never again brought back] Animadversion and Punishment.

This order was one of several against such scholarly improprieties as horse racing and attendance at taverns, which reflected the broad view of moral excesses held by the masters, and particularly by William Stith, who was elected president of the College at that same meeting. In March of 1752, Stith preached a sermon to the General Assembly which condemned gambling, and the diversions, excesses, and vices attending the activity.

An anonymous letter published in the *Virginia Gazette*, 1752, addressed a popular defense of cockfighting, which contended that rather than being cruel, the sport merely gave scope to the gamecock's "natural instinct" to fight. The author noted the belief that "because some brute Animals are naturally fierce therefore men are to cultivate and improve that Quality in them." He maintained, however, that men should not exaggerate or encourage this natural fierceness; "on the contrary it is observable that the most civilized Part of Mankind has always tam'd and render'd useful many of the fierce Animals, as they ought to have done."

Finally, the letter argued that the consequences of cockfighting were so undesirable as to warrant repudiation of the sport. Here the author spoke from his own experiences at a cockfight, where he observed with much concern:

...some Gentlemen, who, upon other occasions, behav'd with great Decency... did then speak and act, as if the Divine Law had been for that Time abrogated, opening their mouths with horrid Oaths, and dreadful imprecations.

The writer's concern in this regard was very much consonant with the comments of others who opposed cockfighting. On January 27, 1752, another contributor to the *Virginia Gazette* included the sport among those "luxuries" which had disrupted the body politic by distracting

officers of the government. In later years, Elkanah Watson, was:

...deeply astonished to find men of character and intelligence giving their countenance to an amusement so frivolous and scandalous, so abhorrent to every feeling of humanity, and so injurious in its moral influence, by the inculcation of habits of gambling and drinking, in the waste of time, and often in the issues of fighting and duelling.

In fact, concern over the social consequences of cockfighting became much stronger than interest in the welfare of the animal or attention to the presumed cruelty of the practice.

Dissent from the prevailing, favorable attitudes about cockfighting grew progressively through the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and prepared public opinion, especially in affluent circles, for the gradual repression of cocking in the early 1800s. But his opposition developed slowly, and only after cockfighting enjoyed a period of unprecedented popularity in Virginia between 1750 and 1790.

Cockfighting was "discountenanced" by the Continental Congress in 1774 and, while advertisements for matches were not subsequently published until the 1780's, there is little evidence that interest in the sport subsided.

In the 1780's references to fights were common in the journals of foreign military officers who travelled through the Commonwealth during the Revolution. These journalists often confirmed the fractious temperament of the crowd, and were repelled by the gratuitous violence of the observers.

Virginia laws attempted to contain the riotous behavior spawned at cockmatches by regulating wagers, but these laws were generally ignored. By the early nineteenth century the social consequences of cockfighting were broadly decried in polite society, which reviewed with regret the "vices of love of show, haughtiness, and sensuality" that marked the late eighteenth century, and recalled that "many of the wealthier class were to be seen seeking relief from the vacuity of idleness, not merely in the allowable pleasures of the chase and the turf, but in the debasing ones of cock-fighting, gaming, and drinking." Of course, the attraction of cockfighting did not disappear with the close of the eighteenth century, but has instead remained strong through the present day, when cockmatches are regularly, though clandestinely, held throughout Virginia.

The National Sporting Library's shelf of cockfighting materials is anchored by the presence of such key texts as *The Royal*

Pastime of Cockfighting (1709, reprinted 1899), which has been quoted above, and by Sketchley's *The Cocker* (1814), one of the most significant cocking books of the early nineteenth century. The collection is given scope by several important American works including Dr. J. W. Cooper's *Game Fowls* (1868), by the more recent treatment of the topic found in Arch Ruport's *The Art of Cockfighting* (1949), and by an assortment of pamphlets designed for gamecock trainers.

Bibliophiles will want to examine the artfully rebound copy of *Cocking and Its Votaries* (ND, ca. 1885) produced by Riviere & Sons. Bound complete in green moroccan and adorned with unusual goldleaf detail, the attractive cover is

reflected within by the introduction of numerous illustrations which were foreign to the original. Among these are reprints from the *Sporting Magazine* of 1793, miniaturized facsimiles of broadsides, and various engravings by Rowlandson, Hogarth, Marshall, Barronger, and Herring. To the original text has been added a portrait and sixteen page biography of the sportsman, author, and cocking enthusiast George Osbaldeston.

In order to achieve a more complete coverage of cockfighting in Virginia the NSL hopes to acquire the rare "*Rules of Virginia and North Carolina for Cockfighting*" (Richmond, 1860) and certain essays and text still in print, particularly *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese*

Cockfight, by Clifford Geertz, and *Man and the Natural Wonder* by Keith Thomas.

In order to clarify the distinctions to be made between animal use and animal abuse a careful study of ethics, of animal maintenance and exploitation, as well as of the conditions which initially generated interest in animal welfare, must be undertaken by all who wish to express consistent, informed views on the subject. The National Sporting Library's collection of cockfighting texts provides accessible materials for research into the history of one of the primary causes in the evolution of modern sensibilities toward animals in Western culture.

A Delightful Description of Cockfighting

Peter Winants

The focus of the some 10,000 books in the National Sporting Library is on horses and horse activities. However, literature on sports that are closely aligned with the lifestyle of horse people also are present in the collection, and this includes the venerable sport of cockfighting.

The historical and practical aspects of cockfighting are meticulously described in George Ruly Scott's "A History of Cockfighting," which was published in London by Charles Skelton, Ltd. Though a date is not listed, references in Scott's text indicate that the edition of 1095 numbered copies was published in the mid or late 1950s.

The practical aspects of Scott's book include: breeds and varieties of fowl; breeding, raising and training cocks; the spur; the pit; the actual battle.

Scott states that it is felt by many that cocks were initially brought to Britain by Phoenician traders in search of tin in mines in Cornwall, while others say that Romans brought cocks when Britain was invaded.

Scott quotes a paragraph by historian William Fitzstephen, who described the lifestyle of the English in the 12th Century: "Every year on Shrove Tuesday the schoolboys do bring gamecocks to their masters, and in the forepart of the day to dinner time, they are permitted to amuse themselves with seeing them fight."

Cockfighting is described as England's national sport in the 1700s and 1800s, when it attracted more attention than horse racing. Scott states that lord Derby, a pillar of the turf, was a cockfighter, and that cockfights were frequently held at race meets throughout the British Isles.

Scott credits Sir Walter Gilbey's book "Sport in Olden Times" (Vinton & Co.,



In America's early days, outdoor cockfights were held at race meetings, taverns and courthouses.

London, 1912) for an incident that substantiates the relative importance attached to racing and cocking: "At Chester (race course) in 1834, it was reported to the executive of the race meeting that the battles in the pits were well fought and prolonged, and that the main would not be over at the hour fixed to begin racing. The clerk of the course, therefore, made no demur to the postponement of the first race until three o'clock."

Gilbey also wrote that a map of London in 1761 had 10 Cock Alleys, nine cock Courts, eight Cock Yards and four Cock Lanes.

Furthermore, Scott researched John Timbs' "Romance of London: Strange Stories, Scenes and Remarkable Persons of the Great Town" (R. Bentley, London, 1865) to reveal that the orchestra pit was

the cockpit, that cockfighting was the original purpose. Timbs stated that the Phoenix, one of England's oldest theatres, was originally named the Cockpit, and it was on Cockpit Alley.

Scott has a delightful section on the effect of cockfighting on the English language, citing the adjectives "cocky" and "cocksure" and the noun "cock of the walk." Other terms are not as obvious. "Well heeled," for instance, originally described a chicken with a good pair of natural spurs or steel spurs; "Battle royal" was a type of cockfight in which a number of cocks were turned loose in a pit; "to show the white feather," giving the appearance of being afraid, was garnered from the belief that chickens with white feathers in their plumage were poor fighters; "to turn tail" originally was what

transpired when chickens avoided battle.

Scott cited fascinating anecdotes on cockfighting. He credits Reginald Heber, who wrote a rule book for cockfighting in 1751 for a vivid description of the term "basketing."

"If any man lay more money then he haith to pay, or cannot satisfy the party with whom he hath laid bets, either by his credit or by some friend's word, he is to be put into a basket to be provided for that purpose. He will be hanged up in that basket in some convenient place in the

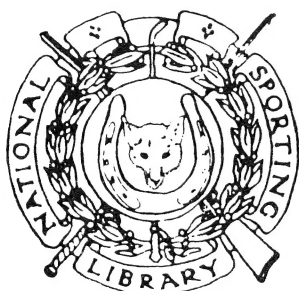
cockpit that all men may know during the time of play that day. And, also, the party so offending will never be permitted to come into the pit until he hath made satisfaction."

"Basketing" survived until the end of the 18th Century.

Scott also explained that Stamford, Conn., owes its name to the result of a cockfight. The original settlers of what is now Stamford initially use the Indian name Rippowam for their new home. In 1641, however, the settlers decided to

change the name to either Ayreshire or Stamford. The sporting element decided on an unusual way to make the decision. Two fighting cocks were obtained, and the debated names were bestowed, one for each bird. A cockpit was built in front of the town hall, and a battle was fought to the finish. Stamford won.

Richard Powell is associated with the Coach and Livestock Department at Colonial Williamsburg. Peter Winants is the President and former editor of *The Chronicle of the Horse*. We are grateful to these 'Friends' for their contributions.



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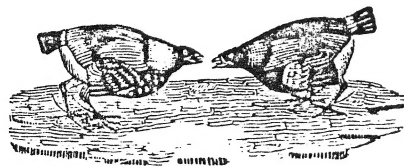
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A caricature, most likely of enthusiast George Osbaldeston, added to NSL's extra-illustrated edition of *Cocking and It's Votaries*.

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